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A thesis presented to  
The Graduate Faculty of  
The College of Arts and Sciences  
Department of English  
Georgia College & State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

M. Alsobrooks

April 2022



Thesis/Dissertation Signature Request Form  
[they]

Submitted by Mary Alsobrooks in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of M.F.A. in Creative Writing.

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m. alsobrooks

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## asthma attack at regionals

2013 -- Wamego, Kansas

### Heat 1

*I remember counting the seconds before each race pulling  
white clouds into my lungs hoping if I matched the Wamego sky  
at its calmest I'd save us all from spring twisters*

inhaling          10      20      30 seconds turned to    hours  
turned to          years

*six years of running in place as if these feet could carry me past  
pastures & golf courses coach tells me look up look ahead stay hot  
on her heels give her no room to breathe take it easy pace yourself  
breathe in through the nose breathe out through the mouth*

while water filled my lungs                  on dry ground    running on  
hardtracksofttrack    didn't matter                  it still cut when I  
fell

*crowd holding their breath until I got up kept going 600 meters to  
go not even red reclaimed rubber shredding my knees & palms to  
ground chuck could keep me from my place on that podium yes I  
am thankful navy blue uniforms don't show blood or grass barely  
shined soaked in sweat*

I was gasping I was drowning on dry land  
firstplace last place I worked just as hard  
I did it to myself  
gave it my self  
gave it  
my all

*and for what gave if not to receive so they'd trust me enough to let  
me break free from towering prairie grass swaying gold spiteful  
pollen making each race an exercise in lungs & family*

Heat 2

*this race is an exercise in lungs & family momma sitting in the  
stands cheering daddy at the edge of the track barking out my  
name this is only my third memory where they occupy the same  
state if I fall out here will I ever forgive myself*

momma used to swim backstroke inHouston count seconds  
between breaths  
& i was just swimming on drylandwater in my lungs  
pumping legs&arms  
running on dry land hardland hard on mylegs  
cattle watching me pump  
myarms my lungs just giving it all  
organs & all

*to bees & gophers & whatever wall of air could hold me carry me  
down that back stretch before fighting me on the straightaway*

breathing was taking it all my organs&all  
more than it took from daddy when he ran inLansing  
when he won inDetroit  
on dry land hard land hard track more than momma  
or daddy took from me from themselves from  
eachother

*even when they left the Rocky Mountains for Flint Hills left  
blizzards for April storms & tornado warnings & a divorce I don't  
remember made me a child with too much energy in the mind just  
trying to shut it all up all out leave room only to chant in through  
the nose out through the mouth goddamnit goddamnit Mary  
breathe*

Heat 3

*there is the finish line there is the last girl in my way I dig into  
whatever part of me can turn desperation into speed I let it all out  
in that last 100 meters cross the white line find my lungs filled with  
magma only tears and the cool wet grass can soothe where is  
momma where is daddy I can hear them calling from far away*

I was stuck between counting seconds that were  
years

that were lifetimes I was stuck between two  
lifelines

two states of matter gas&liquid battling for space in  
mylungs

two parents two ways

to stay aboveground  
abovewater

above it all—

but momma&daddy never asked me to choose  
never asked that much of me neverasked as much of  
me as Idid  
just picked me  
up off the ground & heldme toldme  
goodjob  
breathe  
good job  
breathe  
  
good job  
  
keep  
  
breathing

## Car Accident at the Flagler Beach Farmers Market

2003 -- Daytona, Florida

My arms are sore from catching too many bonnetheads  
off the pier, so Daddy's holding my sunburnt hand  
in his leathery one while we walk around the farmers market.  
He goes straight for the watermelon, which is maybe  
the only fruit I ever saw him eat. We pick the biggest,  
so there's enough to share, and I want to carry it  
but Daddy tells me I'm too small. We carry on,  
heading past sweet peas, aloe plants,  
and fresh baked bread to buy a hibiscus plant  
for the Woman Waiting at Home. I feel a little sad,  
because I think *she's gonna kill it*, and I know Daddy  
will buy her another one—We pass the line for popcorn,  
me waddling under the heavy bags that say  
*Winn Dixie* or *Walmart* or *Circle K*, or simply *Thank You*,  
and I want to stop because I am hungry and it smells good,  
but Daddy is never hungry, which means I don't get to be hungry.  
He says *no*, so we keep on walking past a little boy  
in the popcorn line holding hands with a woman  
who probably said *yes*.

Except there is no line anymore,  
it's scattered like all the sounds  
of people buying produce they probably won't use and plants  
they will definitely kill. Disappeared under a screeching  
that lasts two blocks, all the way to the Atlantic Ocean, right there,  
over the sand dunes. The water breathes salt into my face,

mixed now with the salt of flying popcorn, flung from the hands  
of the boy, two-inches shorter than me, less than two-feet away.  
Now sweat—mine is sticky from the heat and sweet from fear  
because all I hear is the ringing  
of our cracked watermelon Daddy has dropped  
when he tries to push his bags into my scrawny arms, dropping me  
and everything to sprint towards a woman who has flown 30-feet  
and rolled another 20, and I think

*I didn't know bodies moved like that*  
and now that she's come to a rest, Daddy has pulled off his shirt,  
the one I've decided is his favorite, yellow Charlie Brown shirt,  
and I think

*we never even watch Peanuts*  
to press against the mouth of the cave where her arm hangs  
by a thin rope meant to keep me from falling in,  
and I'd never seen a human bone for real before,  
just plastic and spooky and *only \$9.99*,  
but here are some real bones, and they look  
sharper, like weapons ripped from their holster,  
*John Wayne or Mr. Eastwood style*,  
threatening, pointing out at me from both her ankles,  
and I think *it's not polite to stare*,

*but neither is pointing at me*  
and a lady asks me *are you hurt?* and I shake  
my head, so she asks me *were you part*  
*of the accident?* and I just keep staring,  
and I think *you shouldn't talk to strangers*  
she walks off and I finally look away

from the rude bones to Daddy's mouth yelling  
something about *pressure* and *ambulance* and *delay*  
and I think

*can I fix the watermelon with pressure or  
would it ruin Daddy's favorite shirt more?*

and I think *maybe I should scoop up its red guts to plug  
my eyes and cover my ears*

and I stop thinking for a second when I spot  
the little boy, eyes so wide they might pop  
from his head and land in his empty popcorn bag  
which makes me think

*popcorn probably smells good with burnt rubber.*

Then I remember to think

*remember to breathe, dummy,*

because sometimes I would forget, too busy thinking  
about everything else and nothing at all, and now  
my chest is the watermelon cracking, so I take a big  
breath. It almost helps me hear again, because finally  
there are sirens. And I can hear the little boy  
crying. I don't join him because crying takes oxygen  
and tears and I didn't really have either,

just endless thoughts *I'm a good kid,*

*quiet kid, can remember oxygen*

*and Daddy's favorite shirt and how to breathe*

*kid.*

And then Daddy is dragging me away, baggies and all,

and I ask *why are we leaving?*

because I haven't yet learned Daddy hates the cops,

and of course the sirens were cops, not the ambulance  
still stuck in traffic 15-minutes away. *Why are you leaving  
your favorite shirt?* and he tells me *we have to go*  
and *the shirt doesn't matter*, but it matters to me  
because I remember it turning from Charlie Brown yellow  
to Great Pumpkin orange when the blood soaked it through.  
And now we are passing an overturned car, and the driver is old,  
so is his wife, and they are both fine in body, but not mind  
because they look glazed over like fresh Krispy Kreme donuts.

And I think *I'm still hungry.*

I see a bit of the struck woman stuck in the grill of their car,

so I think

*I wish it was the Woman Waiting at Home.*

When we get home, I want to eat the broken watermelon,  
and I want to buy Daddy a new shirt, and mostly I want  
to watch the news. But the woman at home is in one piece  
and she loves her hibiscus, and I am not a hibiscus,  
so she turns off the news. She says *you don't need to know  
what happened*, as if I didn't just see it, and she says  
*you don't need to know if that woman is okay;*  
*it's none of your business.*

And even when I make it  
my business and search for the accident 17-years later,  
I still don't know whether that woman lived or died.  
When I ask Dad, on our first phone call in over a year,  
if he remembers the accident, he tells me *yes*.  
He can't tell me anything more about the mangled woman  
or the little boy, but he does remember yanking me out of the way

of the screeching car, ready to sacrifice watermelon  
and hibiscus and limb to keep me intact,

and I think      *I don't remember this.*

## **Lone Star State :: Nosebleed**

*2004 -- Trinity, Texas*

I sit outside without sunscreen for three hours after someone calls the main office, promising explosions before the day is done. A bomb threat. Planted. Prank. I try to play patticake. I try to lay down. I try to curb my fear with laughter when my classmate cracks a joke. A teacher yells at us to Sit up and Shut up. This is Serious. She smacks each S in time with her bright pink bubblegum confiscated from the boy three kids down. I spend the next two hours picking at the chigger bites forming on my thighs. I spend the next two hours wondering what the school would look like in pieces. I hope no one dies.

My nosebleeds are not considered serious, not after the third full week. They start after my favorite part of P.E. Running laps, zooming past the other kids. I am fast because I try. My body catches up. Gushing blood. Ruby red. Firetruck red. Dripping down my arm while I hold one hand up, wait to be called on. They stop sending me to the nurse. They tell me it is the dry air, the heat. They tell me there is nothing to be done. They don't stop class when I slip away to wash up in the locker room. They make me run when I tell them I am dizzy, I feel sick. Running is no longer my favorite part. I ruin several shirts. I don't know how to remove blood stains from cotton.

A Big Brother clotheslines me after school. I am told that I am no good at Red Rover. I am told to come over, and then I am told by a grown man's arm to hit the ground. I am told to breathe. I am told to walk it off. I am not told sorry, not by the man who has knocked me off my feet. Fully airborne. Fully horizontal. For half a second. I am told not to tell anyone.

I get into trouble for showing off a pocket encyclopedia during recess. Reproductive organs. Bladders. Urethras and rectums. I am trying to disprove the third grade boys and their theory about how girls pee. I know our organs look different, inside and out. I cannot understand why these differences make me so angry. I stop being angry for a moment. Feel shame. A teacher tells me the encyclopedia is inappropriate. I cannot understand why sharing knowledge is dirty. Am I dirty?

I win an award for the Thanksgiving story I wrote for class. The principal gives me a certificate. The principal lets me pick a pencil from her drawer. The principal tells me to read the story over the intercom. The whole school pauses to listen. I read. The Day My Thanksgiving Turkey Came to Life. I read. It chased me with a knife. I read. I kill it a second time. It tastes delicious. I draw pictures to go with the story. Grey colored pencil making the knife sharp. I color the people and the turkey with the same apricot. The grownups are proud. I use my pocket knife to sharpen the special pencil from the principal. I use it to write another story. And another. Another.

## Long Live the King

*2010 -- Mini Season, Summerland Key, Florida*

It was the biggest lobster I'd ever seen,  
king of our cross-section of canal,  
gentle ruler of fish  
nibbling at concrete.

Gracious,  
the lobster welcomed me  
as a visiting dignitary—  
I would stare for hours,  
head hanging  
over the water,  
imagining  
the submerged kingdom.

At two each day, foot-long feelers  
would emerge  
from some hidden crevice,  
working their way out  
from under the shadow  
of my head  
and into the sunlight.

Our king was patient,  
    holding me in a trance,  
        eyes locked with mine.

    I could not move  
unless it was to reveal  
    my hidden offerings—gifts  
from my human realm.

I would drop  
    golden  
    fried chicken bones,  
        silvery  
        pilfered fish skins  
into the water,  
offerings shared  
    in gratitude for letting me linger  
        just outside  
the lobster's borders.

Each citizen-fish knew to wait  
    until the king had its fill.  
Its feelers would dance  
    over the scraps,  
claws acting as royal tasters,  
    probing for any traps.

Satisfied,  
the lobster-monarch would eat  
deliberately,  
eyes focused back on mine.

I thought  
it was out of kindness or praise,  
but no,  
it knew to watch  
for predators.

Finished, the lobster would creep  
backwards,  
feelers folded behind  
to light the path.  
Only then could the loyal subjects  
feast,  
fish going wild  
for the remains of my leftovers.

And just like that, I had bribed  
a kingdom into comfort—  
now, I could dangle my toes  
in the water without fear  
that my only summer friends  
would flee.

## snapshot of poet as prey :: video

2009 -- Key West, Florida

slowed down the video begins on blue sky melting into pink  
purple clouds dissolving where sky meets ocean water lapping  
against the hull of a white fishing boat sound barely heard under  
a woman yelling *get closer!* shrill even at half the speed  
pan from sky to fishing poles lines left in the water now to a  
dark haired teen<sup>1</sup> swallowed by a bait-stained tshirt she turns from  
watching the horizon pause on two frames of green gills before  
she scoots towards the red headed red faced woman<sup>2</sup> beat eyes  
back on the water stomach lurching with the boat the woman  
grabs her burnt thigh<sup>3</sup> yanks it across vinyl seating sound of  
summer ripping a small yelp *smile!* then  
somewhere out of frame gulls call  
to each other somewhere fish steal the last of the bait the girl's  
face turns into a grimace<sup>4</sup> closed mouth no teeth no sparkle  
in green eyes hidden behind darkened glasses just freckles  
& peeling skin

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<sup>1</sup> *I could tell you that I recognize the child in this video, but she and I are so far removed, I am ready to believe she was just a myth, a deep fake, a conspiracy built around how the body unfolds at puberty.*

<sup>2</sup> *I am afraid if I put this woman's name into writing, she will appear, summoned from whatever nightmares I've made of her.*

<sup>3</sup> *Others claim her thighs, her cheeks, the softness of her stomach and edge to her eyes, each part cataloged, scratching out the box labeled Perfect Little Girl. Who was she?*

<sup>4</sup> *The child I remember would never let a face like that slip, knew to keep the ship moored until the storm had passed. If I could slip a whisper into the wind buffeting her face, I would tell her everything I now know. Would she listen? Tell me, would I have listened?*

**He bends! He stretches! He even ties in knots!**

*2002 -- Camp Double E, Emporia, Kansas*

My bones bend without breaking.

I am a rubber man, Stretch Armstrong  
stuffed into the casing of a little kid.

Trapped at Girl Scout Camp, suffocating  
at the bottom of a tickle pile,

I cry because bones shouldn't bend  
like that. And I cry because this body  
never fits right. It can't stretch  
to fill the same spaces as the others—

little girls, Stacies and Chelseas sealed  
tight in plastic packaging, waiting to grow up  
into their Barbie Dream Homes—

This body always reaches out,  
stretching as far as it can go  
to grasp at the shortest straw,  
only to creep back into shape  
when I'm not looking.

Listen, rubber and plastic  
are petroleum playing dress up.

Bring either doll close to the campfire.  
They'll melt just the same.

## **Baby Boys & Little Burgers**

*2000 -- Louisville, Kentucky*

I am five, legs kicking off the edge of a frumpy grey chair in a Kentucky hospital. I am waiting by myself to get a very special gift, something I hadn't known I wanted until Daddy had called on a random Sunday to tell me a secret. The lady he liked was pregnant, a baby boy growing in her tummy. A baby brother, one of my very own. A proper son for my daddy, not the pretend one I'd been disguised as earlier that summer when I'd gotten gum stuck in my hair and Daddy had cut my bangs like a boy, not a borrowed one like the lady's older son. A little baby boy. I know Daddy is excited. A lot has happened in the last year—he moved to Kentucky and met the lady and they fell in love. He had a house for me to visit him in over the summer, instead of the Army barracks like back in Kansas. And now, a baby on the way. A boy. I've already decided that I will love him. I will love him better than my older siblings love me, like him more too. I will teach him to fish, and I will talk Daddy and the lady and Mommy into letting my baby brother come visit me in Kansas. I will read him books and feed him bacon and keep him safe from the Big Kids that like to bully, Big Kids like my sister, like his brother, these siblings we will kinda share.

Daddy has been gone for a few hours—I have already run the bead maze ten times, clacking the beads louder and louder each time. The last go-round is so loud a nurse has to come over to shush me. Ashamed, I put myself back in my chair as timeout—I am hungry and tired and lonely, but I don't complain, just twirl my hair and fidget in my seat. When Daddy returns, he looks angry. Red and scrunched. I only know a little bit about babies being born, but I thought he'd look happier. He spots me, grabs my arm a little harder than normal, tells me we're going to the car. We hurry out of the hospital into a sunny city day. It's not until I'm buckled up in the backseat that I speak up. "When do I get to see my baby brother?" "You don't have a baby brother!" he snaps back. Nothing about that makes sense—not Daddy raising his voice or telling lies. I've known for months that there would be a baby, but now there isn't? Did he disappear? Did he die? Did the lady change her mind about sharing the baby with me? Was the baby boy actually a baby girl? Was that why Daddy is mad? I don't speak up again.

We drive until we find a White Castle. Daddy gets me out of the car and leads me inside. He orders a billion hamburgers, some fries, a Pepsi. He gets me a Sprite. We sit down to eat, and I scrape the white onions off of my little burgers onto a thin napkin. Their taste stays on the buns, sits icky on my tongue, but I don't complain. I am still puzzling through why we are here and not at the hospital with the baby and the lady. I chew slow, make it through half of a little burger, before Daddy pats me on the head with his left hand, moves it down to rest on my shoulder. He's calmed down, no longer red but still kinda scrunched. I swallow hard, sip my Sprite, ask again: "When do I get to see the baby?" Daddy takes a shallow breath, runs his right hand over his face—my eyes follow his stubbed pointer finger, the one he told me he lost to a shark. "You don't get to see the baby." "But why not?" "The baby isn't mine—it isn't your baby brother." I don't get it, not then. I don't get how a baby Daddy thought he helped make couldn't be his. "How do you know?" "The doctor told me—the baby has the wrong blood type. It can't be mine." Daddy takes his hand from my shoulder and looks down at the wrappers of all the little burgers he's eaten up. I don't finish my other half.

**snapshot of poet as prey :: audio**

2006 -- Key West, Florida

a father's voice comes in first    *promise to keep quiet around her*  
the clip on the "t" means he meant it    there are birds calling out  
muffled sounds of children playing on gravel    a small voice replies  
*okay daddy I promise*    a door softly opens    clicks shut

cut to the cackle of a hyena wearing a woman's face    drool spilling  
from peeled back lips    incessant drip drip dripping    she asks    *do*  
*you love me?*    the child should respond    say yes    but the sound  
cuts out

static

the father again    *try to stay out of her way*    again    *it's only for*  
*the summer*    again    *I love you Mary*

cut    the hyena hisses out another question    *who do you love more*  
*me or God*    *or the computer you worship each Sunday?*  
in the background a tv groans    laugh track playing at the wrong  
time    a car alarm goes off somewhere down the street

the sound of a child    holding her breath    next    an accusation  
*adultery is a sin*    strange slip of the tongue    the child forgets  
her vow of silence    the child forgets she is afraid    *do you mean*  
*idolatry?*    the tape ends here

## Dear Otis

When Momma pulled me sticky from her womb,  
did she see a flash of you? My green-eyed doppelganger,  
boy that was never born, hanging handsome from your lips—  
our Daddy would have stayed in that tiny Kansas town  
long enough to raise you into a man built from his image:  
punk-ass wise-guy, rebellious womanizer making quick work  
of all the girls in our grade, county lines be damned.  
How lucky the world was not to have you,  
running rampant, sowing chaos and your seed like the Good Lord  
had whispered sin into your tiny ears—*That's my boy.*  
Or, Otis, would you have been a queer just like me?  
Fear as aphrodisiac, smart enough to keep your locker room crush  
on John to yourself, to hide the ache you felt in your stomach  
when you knocked Scott flat on his back Friday night  
on the football field—would you have leveraged the glow  
of a computer screen into late night meetings, swapping spit  
and more with a much older man from Manhattan under  
a new moon, no moonlight to spotlight that shame?  
Only God watching from on high—*You fucking fag.*  
Otis, where did our anger go? Mine was stillborn  
before I had the chance to bloom, bred out of me  
by countless voices reminding me to be a lady, so I buried  
those red seeds out back with our dead pets, the birds  
and kittens we loved so much. But being a boy means  
you get to rage with abandon, isn't that right?

Did you find your anger in the meth our sister smoked  
in the backseat of her beat up car, some douchebag you'd threaten  
to kill driving y'all down a gravel country road?  
Did you find it in the bar fights our brother was drunk enough  
to finish, beer bottles and fists finding the softest parts  
of each fucker's skull? Would you have let our stepdad buy you  
a gun, a rifle, something solid to shoot the shit over,  
treating hunter safety as a lesson in stealth?  
Otis, tell me, if you find your secrets and God's wavering love  
too much to bear, will you bury your anger, my mirror image,  
down your throat along with the glimmering barrel of that gun?

## Otis Replies :: Ghazal

Mary, we were dredged from the same reservoir—borrowed boy & girl  
made from transplanted mud moved to a Kansas town full of boys&girls

& nowhere for us to exist in between. Everyone knows what I am,  
fatherless faggot standing under five foot five, green-eyeing boys & girls

from behind the covers of books that promised a body shaped differently.  
My chest is as much an empty weight as yours, neither boy nor girl—

Manhood is a stop gap, a shield pocked with blind spots. Womanhood  
is an empty invitation sprayed with perfume & cyanide. Boys & girls

don't fantasize outrage in the same way—don't grow roses out back  
among the bones of our pets. I wouldn't trade my life for boys & guns,

wouldn't rebel yell and make Otis a curse from our mother's mouth.

No, you & I will always endeavor to be someone more than boy or girl.

## Papa's Duet :: "She's Got You"

Mom told me once that you'd nearly beat a man to death  
behind a nameless country bar outside of Houston.  
You'd caught this man, a plain-clothes dandy, looking at you  
too long, at your handsome lips moving along to Patsy Cline's  
"She's Got You," your leg tap-tap-tapping in tight blue jeans.

Through the cigarette smoke, he mistook your glare  
for an invitation. When you walked out back to take a piss,  
he followed you. You were swinging both fists before all five  
fingers of his hand could rest gently on your shoulder.  
*Faggot* rolled off your tongue, over-enunciating each "t"  
with the wet crunch of bloodied teeth on gravel.

And wouldn't I know? As a kid, I'd been shoved down face first  
at recess by a boy in my class, upset that my hair was shorter  
than his. He never apologized, but you did, ashamed  
without telling me why. When I told you the tooth fairy  
wouldn't want my broken canine, you said not to worry—

I woke to a two dollar bill under my pillow.



Papa, are you listening? I conjure your ears into each piece  
of chipping wood you left as legacy—the grandfather clock  
calling from the wall, the record player scratching out

*I've got your memory. Or, has it got me?*

I ask Mom if you would've still loved me. "Of course,"  
she tells me, but Patsy echoes louder—

*She's got you.*

That little girl bouncing on your knee, all big cheeks and elbows,  
smile showing one, two, three missing teeth—

*She's got you,*

while I, the tranny, the fag, the cocksuckingcarpetmuncher  
with the same chubby cheeks and sharp elbows,  
have only *your records, your picture, your memory* to ask

could you still love me with each tooth in my mouth?

If you have the answer, please, Papa, tell me now.

**putrescine // cadaverine<sup>1</sup>**

2021 -- Atlanta, Georgia

I have only a few pictures of you smiling<sup>2</sup>—one shot:  
you, in your thirties, full mustache and desert combat gear.  
You've posed close to the camera, smoking scrap pile  
directly behind you. Metal twisted from tank to backdrop.  
Sitting in class, I learn the real reason you were sent to a desert  
full of civilians with targets on their backs. How early in the Storm  
had they learned to mistrust the smell of oil and exhaust?  
Black gold buried under their families, their burnt bodies,  
and you, older than most of the boys sent to roast in metal  
machines stinking of patriotic sweat, old enough to know better

—on the phone, you say,

*I wish they'd pump the smell of death into theaters*

*so the screen wouldn't make mortality seem so damn distant.*

A pause. A groan. You say, *I'll never forget the way burnt hair  
clings to the inside of your nose*—heavy with the sour scent  
of copper & piss & shit and the screams you pick out from  
the memory of crackling heat everytime you smell gasoline—

*I wouldn't hesitate to kill again—*

you've got a short list of men responsible for hurting me<sup>3</sup>,  
hurting my sister. You raise your voice, talk faster.

*Someone's got to do it. Why not me?*—You, who's killed before,  
innocence shelled on both sides of the sand—

You get quiet,

slow down. *I'd be fine with three hots and a cot.*—

*I'm just waiting to die.*—

I hold my breath, as if I could keep the smell from my tongue.  
You, who's smelled the same for twenty years<sup>4</sup>, tell me,  
*But I can wait until the life insurance kicks in.*

---

**putrescine // cadaverine :: <sup>1</sup> what wasn't said**

2022 -- Atlanta, Georgia

<sup>2</sup>I have no pictures of us together—not as we are now:  
me, child reborn, forfeiting my Catholic baptism for a new name.  
You, shrunken, bones brittle from a lifetime of labor.  
You've told me before how you feel about photos,  
how unnecessary they seem when you've got each moment  
stored watertight in your mind.

<sup>3</sup>My mind lets in every leak—here, ocean water. Here,  
sunshowers. Sweat. Memories smudge, ink runs, and I am left  
trying to decipher the code I need to unlock whatever sequence  
of words will get you to believe me when I say on the phone  
*I love you, but I am not your daughter.*—  
How will you reconcile your records with my new reality?—  
*I love you, and I am your child.*

<sup>4</sup>Each day, I smell more like you, indistinguishable  
when I let my arms freckle in the sun, the scent of leather and salt  
blooming each time I reach for a glass of pink lemonade.  
If I could pump that sweetness through the phone,  
would you believe me then? Would you postpone your own decay  
into putrescine and cadaverine long enough to finally meet me  
again?

**sestina for an absentee father upon the rebirth of his child**

My hands are not your hands,  
fingers too slender & long to be confused  
for your short, gnarly digits. But we burn  
the same way, twin lobsters, twice baked  
under a summer sun. I'm sorry I wasn't a son.  
Would that have kept you around longer?

If I had been born a boy, longer  
in my limbs, stronger in my hands,  
could I have reached out & held you? Or are sons  
supposed to keep love to themselves? I'm confused  
by the way you treated me before: love baked,  
sun-kissed, golden child. Why did you burn

with me under so many summer suns, sunburns  
matching across our cheeks? How much longer  
can we stay stuck in summers? How many half-baked  
excuses can I imagine before I forget your hands?  
Tell me that even you were confused  
when the doctors handed you me instead of a son.

I am a satellite orbiting the ideal son  
I've built up in my mind. These thoughts burn  
into my eyes while I stare up, confusing  
the sun for safety—But goddamnit, I can stare longer!  
Our eyes are already ruined. I don't need our hands  
to shield me. Let every part of us bake

away, seep like smoke into our clothes—backed  
into a corner, I see a make believe boy, your son,  
me, reach to the sky & catch all in his hands.  
God, does he look just like you—Can I burn  
with jealousy over my false-self? I've known you longer.  
How can I make this appeal without confusing

you?—Of course you'd be confused.  
How could that sweet girl who hated cocoa but baked  
German chocolate cakes out of love, no longer  
be your daughter, can't be your son?  
When I call, please pick up your burner  
phone. Tell me you remember my small hands

holding tight to your hands, baking in the summer sun.  
You can confuse me for your daughter all you want,  
and I'll let the son in me burn a little longer.

## **Lone Star State :: Captain**

*2006 -- Waco, Texas*

I start a new school. I am in awe. It is big and shiny and new. My classroom is a fancy new building meant just for the fifth graders. I make a new friend. On the playground, there is a map of the world. She shows me where she's from by standing on it. Greece. She asks me if I want to go to her birthday party. I say yes. I say I've never had a friend from another country. I say she is really pretty, and I'm glad I got to meet her. She tells me we can be best friends.

The homeroom teacher tells me I don't belong here. Verbatim. Mary, you don't belong here. She says it squatted down, looking into my eyes. I cry. Confused. She walks me to the front office. I sit for an hour waiting for my mom. They tell her we live on the wrong side of a highway. That they just caught the error. That I will have to go to a school that is twice as far away. She yells at them because I never cry in public and I am still crying. She asks for an exception. They tell us to grab my things and leave. I never see my new best friend again.

I go to a new school. I am still sad. It is small and dull and old. My classroom is in a trailer that was meant to be temporary. We never leave it. I make new friends. Two of them. They are black, and I tell them that they are my first black friends. That there wasn't anything but white people where I came from in Kansas. They are surprised. One friend is short and round, the other is tall and thin.

We hold hands when we stand in line for lunch. I invite them to my birthday party, and we eat too much cookie cake.

I watch a girl in my class cut open her cornea with a workbook page. I know it isn't on purpose, but the teachers whisper. They say she is a troublemaker. They say she will be fine. It will heal. She is fine. The girl comes back to class in three days with an eyepatch. She says it is hard to watch Bill Nye with only one eye.

I read *The Secret Garden* for gifted class. The kids tease me because I am Mary and the Mary in the book is queer. So I must be queer. Different. Odd. Am I odd?

I read *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* for fun. I want to be Captain Nemo. I want to have a ship shaped like a squid and sneak under the waves. I want to dive deeper and deeper and deeper. I want to be anywhere but where I am. I want to read *Moby Dick* next because there is a whale and I love whales. The library doesn't have it. Captain Ahab does not love whales. I daydream a meeting of captains. I am at the head of the table. I am in charge. These men, they listen to me. I tell them that we will look for treasure and then we will look for new fish and then we will stop for lunch. They tell me aye aye.

## Court Mandated Visitation

2005 -- Cape Canaveral, Florida

Your knees complain from squatting at kid level, a gruff lesson on sand fleas commanding us to *stay still and listen* while you hold the large beach bugs in your hands, impatiently flipping them as they try burrowing between your fingers—even so young, so little, I wonder what hidden things they will find in a man who can spring up in seconds, pain be damned, to answer the tug on a fishing line, a pull as strong as the sound of bullets sprayed across a different kind of sand, no water for miles, in a place you won't talk about—You make them bait before they can tell me.

Forgetting the tickle of sand fleas, we leave you sitting vigilant on the beach, one eye on your fishing pole, the other split between us kids in the water and your watch—you cannot rely on the woman sitting with you on the shore to pull us out in time to watch the shuttle rocket across the sky—I cannot rely on her or her god for anything. Her spotted hands are harsh as she slaps sunscreen onto my back, each time I flinch a reminder that I am an unwelcome extra in her cold, blue eyes.

Finally free from the Woman's grasp, I join the other kids in the water. I leap into the waves—I roll with them. They spin me head-feet-head-feet. I feel big & whole & powerful. I open my eyes under the salt water, only one brave or stupid enough, and see what nobody else sees: how the ocean can look unobstructed—It isn't much,

just a churning of sand synchronized with my somersaulting body.  
Something shiny draws my barracuda eyes. The flash of scales  
or maybe one of your lost fishing hooks.

I'm thinking about taking the water in, unhinging my mouth  
wide like a whale shark, wide enough to swallow any fish or hook  
whole, thinking nothing can hurt me here—bumbling apex  
predator, safe from the burning sun or the bruises and scabs  
I'll count across my skin tomorrow. Safe even from the unkind  
words or sharp nails of the jealous woman sitting beside you.

The waves remind me I am only a visitor, a momentary addition  
to the food chain, as they crash me face first into the beach,  
red sand populated by crushed shells sanding my cheeks  
into the same color. Raw & puffy, stinging, singing stinging taunts  
as I leave the crybabies behind—rejoining the stinging waves,  
I go again & again into that water until it is just me.  
Just me & the waves I am visiting—The waves that maybe  
understand me like those sand fleas understand you.

You call me from the beach *Mary, it's almost time,*  
*get up here*—barely heard through the salt clogging  
my bruised ears, but there are your arms waving, and I know  
better than to make you wait. You stay at grown up level  
to dry off my face, rough terry-cloth catching on my raw cheeks,  
sunburn indistinguishable from sand rash, tears easily blamed on  
ocean water or a child's impatience—even so young, so little,  
I am happy not to be treated gently.

Daddy, when you watch me in the waves, do you know  
how they make me big & whole & powerful? Are you proud  
of my raw cheeks? Of my puffy eyes? Of the way I keep quiet  
even when the woman on the shore tells me you don't love me?  
Daddy, do you love me best as we watch the shuttle rocket across  
the sky?

## **Lone Star State :: Bastard**

*2006 -- Valley Mills, Texas*

I start a new school. This is the fourth fifth grade class I've joined. I already miss my old friends. There are only white kids here, only white adults. I am back in small town America. I think that I might as well be back in Kansas. I make friends with the wrong girl at school. She is bullied for starting her period young, for being the first to step into that liminal space between girl and woman. But I like her. She is strange. Am I strange? I feel like it, but now the kids have new words for that feeling. I stick by her side on the playground, only two kids perched on the swings.

We move into a house with lots of windows and mirrors. The windows look out on a section of powerline frequented by hummingbirds. There is one big male that the grownups call a big bastard when he chases away the other birds. I try his new name on my tongue. Big Bastard. Big. Bastard. I get away with something, and no one knows. The mirrors are in the room with the gold shag carpet. I spend hours in this room, rolling around on the plush ground. I do not look into the mirrors. I do not see myself. I see gold. Savannah grass. Shining water. I play make believe, replacing myself with better, smarter, stronger versions. Lion. Captain. Puma. King.

I feel lonely. I spend more time reading and thinking and staring into the ceiling, imagining anything could be real. I feel suffocated,

but I don't know how to tell the grownups. Don't know what to call the feeling of something dark and fuzzy sitting on my chest, picking at my eyelids every morning. I open my eyes, I close them. I am not blinking, I am teleporting myself. I am building. I am trying to figure out what the future looks like. Do I have a future?

I get to pick out two bunnies. They are soft and energetic. One starts peeing all over the wall, starts humping the other. I know enough to know that this spells trouble. There are baby bunnies, but the momma does not feed them. She eats one of them, so we move the rest. I feed them. Baby bottle. Special milk meant for kittens and puppies and other baby mammals. Twice a day. They suckle. They eat. Their stomachs expand, unable to digest without that first round of nutrients from the mother. The grownups explain to me why the babies are dying one by one. I have high hopes for the last one. It dies too. I cry as we bury it with all its siblings in the side yard. Something comes and digs them up, leaves behind the plastic bag we buried them in. We give the big bunnies away.

Coordinates :: 24.4540° N, 81.8775° W

2012 -- Key West, Florida

Out on the boat, Dad tells me,

*Look at the horizon.*

Despite feeling sea sick,

I keep my eyes on that dark

water, right off the gunwale,

watch as sunlight

shimmers

into deep ocean

& disappears.

I dream that night of cold waters

& nurse sharks grinning

with human teeth.

They swim in circles

around Sand Key Lighthouse,

tails turning tornadoes

in the sand.

Their currents carry me miles,

no light to guide me

back to shore,

only squids glowing

bioluminescent

in the summer dark,

showing me how stars

might swim  
through the thickest parts  
of the Milky Way.

I wake up crying, tell no one.

Come morning, I look  
for those sharks & squids,  
hoping they can teach me  
to be light  
headed in a new direction,  
reflected back to guide me.

The water holds  
only my reflection  
dancing  
in the wake of our boat.

## How to Clean a Fish

*2008 -- Key West, Florida*

1.

Normally, the fish is dead  
                                  when I make the first cut,  
                                  but not always.  
Sometimes, they haven't suffocated yet,  
                                  the cold ice  
                                  slowing each  
                                  ragged breath  
until I watch you grab them by the tail  
                                  and smash them  
                                  into the deck,  
                                  teaching me  
the sharp snap  
                                  of necessary violence.

I try to hide my tears, but you see them.  
                                  You never make me do this part.  
Instead, you sharpen the filet knife  
                                  one last time,  
while I wipe my eyes  
                                  on a bait-slicked shirt,  
                                  smart enough  
                                  not to ask for your sleeve.  
Somehow, the shrimp guts sting less  
                                  than the salt of your sweat.

2.

Now, the fish and I are properly numb.

Shock & misplaced empathy  
are sufficient anesthetics  
out by the water.

You've made the knife sharp  
enough to slice a finger  
clean off.

If I slip up, we would match,  
each missing a knuckle—  
yours lost grappling

with the steel teeth  
of some machine  
at grandpa's factory,  
before you'd joined the Army  
or met my mom  
or even  
killed a man.

3.

I've seen pictures of you smiling  
next to the burnt out  
          husk              of a tank.

At school, they ask us to interview  
a soldier for our Veteran's Day essay.  
When I ask about the Gulf War,  
about your life before me,  
you don't know how to teach me  
the right words for  
needless              violence,  
          how greed  
can make a man and a country  
          stupid.

You opt for a kind of honesty instead,  
telling me how the head  
          pops  
from the body like the cap  
of a tube of toothpaste  
when rolled over by a tank, feet first.  
My teacher pulls me aside to scold me.

4.

We troll for big bastards

    pulled from deep ocean

or smaller tricks

    snatched from the bridge,

Mahi and Mullet and Snapper.

    I cut them the same,

slicing from anus

        to cheek,

        careful

not to puncture the stomach

        and spill the guts.

Their innards are slippery.

    Dangerous,

little pockets of black ice

    hidden a hand slip away

from the knife I am driving

        without license.

I slice again across the spine,

    anus to cheek,

        careful

to leave the needle-thin bones,

        choking hazards

    left to be swallowed whole

by the Goliath Grouper

    lurking

        beneath the dock.

He is big enough to swallow me  
completely,  
old enough to know better.

He is happy to wait for  
scraps.

5.

Before I can feed the Goliath,

I finish cleaning our haul.

I slip the knife above the bones

but under the meat.

It slides straight across,

easy.

I peel back the filet.

I cut it loose.

When I flip the fish over to repeat

the process,

I see gills leaking cherry

across the table,

bulging glassy eyes locked

on me.

I go green around my own gills,

and you doubt

I can do this part,

but I don't return the knife.

I finish the job.

## Sonnets Overheard at the High :: Triptych

2022 -- High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia

Walking the halls of the High, I am more like the aphids & wasps,  
the caterpillars & moths Brueghel has hidden amongst his flowers.

Four hundred years as Mother is more than enough—  
I've served my time, earned my own benedictions.

*Madonna, I am here listening, more attentive than God,  
than any man could ever be. If not for the guard standing watch,  
I would kneel and learn to pray with hands folded in your thighs.*

I am waiting to be found, to transform under the discerning gaze  
of some curious patron pushing their luck this close to canvas.

Stuck on this wall, I watch women wipe their babies clean,  
baptism in snot, in imperfection. My own infant is undying,  
safe from crucifixion across these gallery walls.

I pass the Lady in Black Velvet and her lover, Miss Bessie,  
but I am done pretending I fit in with their heavy dresses.

But this heavy wooden frame is its own weight to bear,  
and haven't I been good, my Lord? Ask Flower Brueghel  
to let me step down from his wreath of lilies and irises,  
*Step down from your painting, Mary. We could shave your head*

*and rest by Hassam's sea, sun streaking through the fog to tan  
your tired skin. We could eat our fill of Brown's peaches*

from this burden of purity. Let me rest my scalp, burned  
from centuries of bleach—not even Anne would recognize me.  
Soothe my skin, my Lord, flesh lightened by an unnamed brush—

*and raspberries, spread our syrupy fingers in juice-soaked  
supplication. Would you let me drink deeply the dew that spills  
from your petals? You seem to me a bouquet of sunflowers*

I have rolled my sleeves & cuffed my pants, painted on  
a handsome mustache so the women who's name I have abandoned

*and lavender. But I am too cautious, and my own confidence  
is lacking, so I appeal to you, instead of the girls I have unwittingly  
loved. I bury each juvenile crush in your bosom, tuck those wishes*

won't recognize me. I belong two floors up with the contemporary  
art—Wiley & Solomon are calling for me, their portraits of stylish  
men promising me a place in the booth, if only I'd take it, but no,

I know I cannot go back, cannot find my own face  
in the cherub cheeks of my son. Still, I pray for rest,  
for the soft muslin of my family's death shroud.

*away in my art history books—Mary, may I tell you a secret?  
Listen closely, I can only admit this once...*

I am more like the Untitled Calder twisting from the ceiling.  
Each time the lighting changes, I and my shadow are reborn.  
Isn't that what we always wanted? To shapeshift, to transmute  
from one state of matter to another, defying physics & art  
if only to find some life after the one we have been given.

## Sonnet for Stirrups I :: Baby

2008/10 -- Council Grove, Kansas

My sister first gave birth at 19. I was 13 & terrified.  
I hid down the hospital hallway, listening to her  
screaming *you did this to me*—yelling at the father,  
or at God, or maybe the baby crowning between her legs.  
The second time, I was 15 & positioned sentry,  
fingers crushed in my sister's hand. She didn't scream,  
just gritted her teeth to dust and forgot to breathe.  
After the baby's first breath, my sister asked me  
to cut the umbilical cord. The first snip sent blood  
spraying across my arms & shirt. The second severed  
mother from infant, and I stood executioner awaiting  
orders. The nurses, focused on the crying baby,  
ignored me like I was the bucket of blood  
& shit resting beneath my sister's still stirrups legs.

## Cherry, Would You Believe Sex Made a Ghost of Me?

2010 -- Council Grove, Kansas

The first time, when I offered myself as a gift,  
we were down at the football stadium.

On the high jump mats, he kissed me,  
tongue pushing at my lips. I bit him, startled  
by this request for entry I hadn't planned for.

He laughed, asked, are you ready?

I was not, but I nodded anyway.

He led me up metal stairs to the press box.

Our steps sounded out like a summons,  
a sharp keening in the chilled spring air.

*Calling who knows.*

On the dusty linoleum, he didn't unwrap me,  
not like a gift or the condom from his wallet.  
He peeled me open, impatient, climbed into me,  
and I ripped from my skin—

became a specter,

floating over myself,

looking down,

wondering at freckled shoulders,

*twisting.*

He only grunted for four seconds,  
maybe more, and then silence—No.

Clapping—

Outside, an audience in the bleachers,  
his friends calling for an encore.

*It's always an emptying—  
a filling at our expense.*

Who were they clapping for? Me,  
the new Cherry, christened on the filthy linoleum?  
For the old pro, hiding the used condom in the trash?

*Pull me back into that wretched husk.*

I hushed back into my body, fingers first.  
Rearranged my clothes, found they didn't fit  
the same. I had become something else,  
leaving my living parts smeared on the floor  
and floating in the corner of the ceiling.

Now I was a poltergeist. Spirit.

Undead      Unliving      Unloving

Thing.

*Cherry, call it by our name.*



## Sonnet for Stirrups II :: Slut

2010 -- Council Grove, Kansas

I used to tell my mom that I loved big horses  
because if I were to fall from one, I would die on impact.  
She didn't like that. But it was true, I knew how small I was.  
At 15, feet high in the stirrups at my first Pap smear,  
I thought about answering my doctor's questions  
with white lies. *No, I'm not sexually active*  
because I had sex once, & I never wanted to do it again.  
*Yes, I broke my hymen riding horses*  
because if you tell enough people the same myth,  
it might become true. *No, I'm not scared*, but my body  
told a different story—my doctor scolded me for clenching.  
*Relax*, she said, *You should be used to this by now*.  
As if anything could prepare me for icy metal on hot skin.  
I should've thrown myself from the table—braced for impact.

## Big Kid as Quarry

2012 -- Council Grove Lake, Kansas

I place the first stone in my mouth,  
a heavy river rock, edges worn smooth  
from a summer spent chewing over  
how to say *I don't love you anymore*.

At seventeen, I'm not well-versed  
in these kinds of goodbyes—  
I only know how to whisper  
into open plywood caskets.

I worm my words around the stone  
until I am sure he has heard me.  
He hands me the second stone,  
an ugly chunk of gypsum, asks to talk

when I get home. I shoulder this rock  
for two weeks, muscles bulking up  
until I am strong enough to fly  
the eighteen hundred miles back.

He invites me to the reservoir,  
where I plan to hurl both stones  
into the brown water, turn my back  
to the splash. I won't know

where they've buried themselves  
in mud—Instead, he piles one two  
three jagged pieces of limestone  
onto my lower back, his unkempt nails

digging circles into my spine.  
The weight of him and his hurt  
and his want turning me  
from struggling flesh to marble statue.

I stay frozen while he chips away  
with hammer and chisel and spit  
from his empty mouth. I choke  
so hard on the river stone,

I am surprised to find any teeth left.  
When he is satisfied, he turns me over,  
ties two lead stones to the pit of me.  
They are so small, no one will believe me

when I tell them how they've rubbed  
the rest of me to dust. Even when I manage  
to unload the rest of the quarry I have become,  
I cannot find the rope to cut myself free.

## **The Fly**

*After Cronenberg*

i am your body double  
doing stunts in the mirror  
some real  
cirque du soleil shit  
somersaulting  
across your reflection  
when your flesh  
becomes unfamiliar  
my compound eyes shine  
in the bathroom light  
i watch you  
picking  
at your mottled skin  
pulling  
at your nails as if  
they would pop off  
spraying pus  
checking  
each rotten tooth  
firmly planted  
in your stinking gums  
you are no Brundlefly  
your body  
is only horrible  
in its lack

of transformation

outside the night is filling  
the clamor of incessant  
insect hope  
would you rather  
be out there  
dancing  
with crickets & cicadas  
& fireflies  
for a good time call...  
lighting up their backsides  
making violins of their legs  
bodies unburdened  
by your *human fear*  
*of flesh*  
& yes  
you are human  
your body is healthy  
despite the tricks played  
by your mind  
you are no vermin  
Kafka could recognize  
  
you'd give *anything*  
*to turn*  
*into something else*  
but we both know

your teeth won't budge  
your hand  
is just your hand  
when you swat away  
the fly  
buzzing at your ear

## Living Will :: Roadkill

*2021 -- Middle Georgia*

On the day I decide to bury every child I've been,  
    each little girl and demi-boy,  
I see seven dead deer smeared on the shoulders  
    of backroads and interstates  
all carrying me to Atlanta.

The first deer is a bloated doe, still cooking roadside  
    in a Georgia autumn—  
gasses set to burst at the slightest nudge of bumper or shovel.  
She is left to decompose, clean up relegated to the kindness  
    of vultures and maggots.

Twenty miles and two left turns lead me to deer three—  
    not quite dead,  
she lifts her head to watch me pass, one eye  
    swollen shut, the other  
following the spinning of my tires. In my rearview mirror,  
    I see her neck give out.

I want to turn back, to help the doe, but I am weak.  
Nothing in my car is heavy enough to crack her skull.  
I do not find the courage to hit her a second time.

Right inside the Perimeter, I see the last carcass—  
    barely a buck,  
tender velvet antlers budding from the top of a head  
    bent inward  
like a sick child sleeping—here I am, wrapped around  
    grief, tossing myself  
before the tires of every passing semi-truck.

If I leave them—those girls I’ve been, those children—  
    wandering the highway at night,  
I can grant them the open air burials we’ve dreamed of.

Our intestines glistening, gristle shining in the rising sun,  
    blood congealing around fallen leaves.  
Some passing buzzard makes a meal of us,  
    plucking our eyes first,  
but still we see these beaks stripping every piece of broken flesh,  
    leaving the bones  
for some lucky mutt ready to gnaw free  
    what marrow it can find.

No—it’s some rednecks stopping on their way home,  
    tipped off to our good cuts of meat  
    disguised as roadkill.

These men are our kin, wearing the flannel and denim  
    of our distant family,  
but they do not recognize us outside the backwoods of Texas,  
    the pastures of Kansas.

They lift our limp bodies out of the bed of a red pickup truck,  
    carry us to the shop—  
we fly for a moment before they hang us upside down to bleed.  
    Knife to throats,  
how they marvel at our horns, at the seven hearts  
    sitting still in our chests.

## Notes

“Papa’s Duet :: ‘She’s Got You’” borrows lyrics from Patsy Cline’s 1962 song “She’s Got You.”

“The Fly” takes inspiration from David Cronenberg’s 1986 movie of the same name.

“Sonnets Overheard at the High :: Triptych” references several pieces currently or previously on display at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, Georgia, including:

--- *Holy Family with a Garland of Flowers* - Jan Brueghel the Elder, 1620

--- *Seascape—Isles of Shoals* - Childe Hassam, 1902

--- *Peaches on a White Plate & Red Raspberries on a Forest Floor* - William Mason Brown, 1880 & 1866

--- *Lady in Black Velvet (Portrait of Eulabee Dix Becker)* - Robert Henri, 1911

--- *Portrait of Bessie (Miss Elizabeth Newton)* - Albert Herter, 1892

--- *Thiago Oliveira do Rosario Rozendo from The World State: Brazil series* - Kehinde Wiley, 2009

--- *HEAVY(WEIGHT), Portrait of Benjamin Gasinga Gaspard—Rwanda (born inn DR Congo)* - Papay Solomon, 2019

--- *Untitled* - Alexander Calder, 1947

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## Critical Essay

[they] :: crafting each of the bodies I've been

When I first told my mother that I was trans, not a girl or a woman, not a boy or a man, but someone outside of the binary, she asked me if that meant I would stop wearing skirts and dresses, stop loving pretty things, stop being her baby. I told her of course not, nothing had changed except what I called myself—I said it with such conviction, I almost believed it. When I asked my mother to use they/them pronouns, when I gently corrected her over the next year, she would tell me that using “they” as a singular still confused her. I’d counter back with a remark on the many voices in my head. One would pipe up with Whitman’s “I contain multitudes” (“Song of Myself, 51”). Yes, I’d tell her, I am a plurality. I always have been.

I have always been painfully aware of my body, how I could not fit into it properly and in turn could not fit it into the spaces around me. It felt like a betrayal. Even in high school, I envied the boys and girls around me struggling with their own images of perfection—at least their struggles were reflected in the shows we watched. At least the school counselor was prepared to help them. I was lost at sea, without the language to explain why womanhood loomed as a death sentence. For me, to be transgender has been to struggle with the body, either in a physical sense—flesh unfamiliar, unable to match the images I conjure for myself—, or in a social sense—comfortable in my own skin, I endure the judgments and stares, or worse, of people around me. The body holds onto traumas that even the mind cannot fathom.

This collection is an attempt to use language and the many bodies I have inhabited, imagined or real, to interrogate some of the questions that have shaped my life: what does it mean to be a woman, a man, a person in a country beholden to the binary? What does it mean to be a poet built up and betrayed by language? By my own bodies? What does it mean to live?

## “Are You a Girl or What?”

Before I had heard the terms transgender or nonbinary, I spent a lot of time reworking the language of womanhood in an attempt to put off what I feared was inevitable. Womanhood came with menarche, until mine appeared, and then womanhood came with graduating highschool and entering the adult world... No, it came with marriage and children and taxes and homeownership and everything I couldn't imagine for myself. “Oh no,” I would think, “I guess I can't be a woman.” After playing this game of cat and mouse with my assigned gender at birth for so long, it became difficult to disentangle these markers from my fear of femininity, especially the idea of giving birth and becoming a mother.

Birth and babies appear in several of my poems, but there is a marked lack of celebration. Instead, these poems are plagued by a sense of fear or dissatisfaction—something is off with these miracles. In “Sonnet for Stirrups I :: Baby,” my<sup>1</sup> older sister is giving birth for the first and second time. The first instance is marked only by what I can hear from down the hall: “I hid down the hospital hallway, listening to her / screaming *you did this to me*—yelling at the father, / or at God, or maybe the baby crowning between her legs” (lines 2-4). In this moment, neither my sister nor myself feel we have any agency, any control in this situation. I am but an eavesdropper, listening as womanhood and motherhood, now intertwined in my mind, are thrust upon my sister, still a child herself.

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<sup>1</sup> Here, and in the rest of this discussion, I will refer to my speakers as myself—after all, my argument from the beginning has been that we are all one, yet distinct.

The arrival of the second baby, two years later, sounds very different. Here, my sister and I have both matured—she is able to give birth without screaming, and I am present in the room instead of hiding. In fact, my presence serves to fill the role of the missing father—I am the one holding her hand, and I will be the one to cut the umbilical cord. Here, I chose harsh language to solidify my alienation from the miracle I am now a participant in:

After the baby's first breath, my sister asked me  
to cut the umbilical cord. The first snip sent blood  
*spraying* across my arms & shirt. The second *severed*  
mother from infant, and I stood *executioner* awaiting  
orders. The nurses, focused on the crying baby,  
*ignored* me like I was the *bucket of blood*  
*and shit* resting beneath my sister's still stirrups legs. (lines 8-14, emphasis added)

I had received feedback that “executioner” seemed too harsh, but it felt necessary to keep. In that word alone, I feel the weight of what this moment was—I wasn't just severing mother from infant, I was further severing my sister from her childhood. I was also solidifying my own horrible image of what birth was, that the transition from woman to mother meant wrecking one's body and giving up individuality. In this moment, it seemed as if to be a woman was to always be secondary to someone, to always be that ignored bucket of blood and shit.

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Growing up, it seemed to me that womanhood was also marred by the threat (the promise?) of sexual violence—I saw it on TV, both real and fictionalized on countless episodes of *48 Hours* and *Law & Order: SVU*, I heard about it happening to the very real girls and women around me, and I experienced it myself. I found it understandably difficult to write about my assault—to do so was to write about my own traumas and fears, certainly, but to also acknowledge what had happened to myself and my body because it was confused for a woman's.

I had a breakthrough during Carolyn Forché's virtual residency as the Darugar Scholar. In part, I was inspired by Forché's poem "Museum of Stones." While vastly different in content, I admired the cataloging of her friend's life through the stones he collected. The stones became a way to track his life and, ultimately, a way to honor him. I needed a way to honor myself in that painful experience, but also a way to distance myself, to replace my body. Forché writes, "all earth a quarry, all life a labor, stone-faced, stone-drunk / with hope that this assemblage of rubble, taken together, would become / a shrine or holy place, an ossuary, immovable and sacred" (lines 30-32). Could I not take my own rubble and make it something "immovable and sacred," something different from a scarred woman, from a hurt girl?

In my own poem, "Big Kid as Quarry," I have left my gender unspecified—I exist only as the "I," the "Big Kid," the quarry and statue carved by the experience. I have also chosen to allude to the assault without being explicit; instead, weaving images that build to one possible conclusion. This begins with the word quarry, both an extraction site for stones and a pursued animal. This image expands with the stones I've included, each borrowed from Kansas geology: river rock for lost love, ugly gypsum for the promise to talk, limestone for the literal weight of the assailant, marble for the frozen response of fear, and lead for the invisible burden left behind. In earlier drafts, I had left the stones unnamed, but that seemed a disservice, especially with the power "Museum of Stones" carried in the specificity of stones listed.

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There are two women mostly absent from the collection as it stands, but who have had profound impact on my life and my writing about childhood. One is my beloved mother, a woman I admire greatly. The other is a cliché of a woman, one that I have still been unable to address directly in my writing—my (evil) stepmother. While I am able to name my mother as

Mom, Momma, or Mommy in several of my poems, she is always stuck in her role as my mother. I never call my stepmother by name or by role—instead, she is “the Woman Waiting at Home” (“Car Accident”), “a hyena wearing a woman’s face” (“snapshots... :: audio”), and “the Woman on the Shore” (“Court Mandated Visitation”). Truly, I am still afraid of this woman, and I call this fear out in “snapshot of poet as prey :: video” in footnote 2: *“I am afraid if I put this woman’s name into writing, she will appear, summoned from whatever nightmares I’ve made of her.”* My poems dance around these women because the images I have created of them in my mind are too solid, unimpeachable. It feels impossible to step into their bodies, and yet their presence, for good or bad, is necessary if I am to continue to grow this manuscript into a book length collection.

### **“Aren’t You Man Enough?”**

The harbingers of the gendered violence I saw in the news, in TV shows, and in the lives around me, were most often men. Our country is stuck in its binaries, so if I were to run away from womanhood, what would I be signing up for with manhood? War, homophobia, an inability to express one’s feelings? A relationship dynamic between father and son that I was envious of, at least in the iterations I built in my mind? In reality, I could not be a woman or a man, not as society had constructed them, and yet to know this, to show this and move towards understanding in my collection, I needed to grapple with manhood as I have witnessed it. And that starts with the most important, and infamous, man in my life: my father.

My father participated in the Gulf War, or Desert Storm, before I was born. The lore around why he had to join the Army and his place within that conflict is hazy—my father is a storyteller, at times embellishing or distorting the facts in a way that feels familiar. Yet we differ

in that he has often strived to obscure the emotional truth, while I search for it in my own narratives, my own writing. From the smoke and mirrors of my father's stories, a few moments stand out in honest detail. My poem, "putrescine // cadaverine," opens on a photograph:

I have only a few pictures of you smiling<sup>2</sup>—one shot:  
you, in your thirties, full mustache and desert combat gear.  
You've posed close to the camera, smoking scrap pile  
directly behind you. Metal twisted from tank to backdrop. (lines 1-4)

I have this photograph stashed away in a shoebox—it was gifted to me by one of my older sisters when I graduated from college, along with a thick stack of other photos of my father's life from before I was born. My sister thought nothing more of this gift<sup>2</sup>, but it felt like a sign that I was ready to see and engage with this dark chapter of my father's life and of our country's history. And yet, there he was. Smiling, burnt out body of a tank behind him.

What follows in the poem is dialogue pulled from a phone call my father and I had during the summer of 2021. He is a man ready for the end, body broken from hard labor and illness, and he acknowledges the horrors of violent deaths, and yet passes onto me a promise of violence as service, as duty:

A pause. A groan. You say, *I'll never forget the way burnt hair  
clings to the inside of your nose*—heavy with the sour scent  
of copper & piss & shit and the screams you pick out from  
the memory of crackling heat everytime you smell gasoline—  
*I wouldn't hesitate to kill again*—  
you've got a short list of men responsible for hurting me (lines 14-19)

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<sup>2</sup> Of note, this particular sister and I do not share a biological father, and she has never been fond of mine. This is also the sister featured in "Sonnet for Stirrups I :: Baby."



I chose to section this poem because each part required a different scaffold to hold its weight. The first section relies on two different scenes that set up violence around gender and sexuality: the bar and the playground. There are questions in all three sections, but it is the second section that asks the most, that does the most searching. I also introduce the Patsy Cline song mentioned in the title of the poem in the first section, but the payoff doesn't come until the third section. Here, I weave in lyrics pulled from the song:

Papa, are you listening? I conjure your ears into each piece  
of chipping wood you left as legacy—the grandfather clock  
calling from the wall, the record player scratching out

*I've got your memory. Or, has it got me?*

I ask Mom if you would've still loved me. "Of course,"  
she tells me, but Patsy echoes louder—

*She's got you.*

That little girl bouncing on your knee, all big cheeks and elbows,  
smile showing one, two, three missing teeth—

*She's got you,*

while I, the tranny, the fag, the cocksuckingcarpetmuncher  
with the same chubby cheeks and sharp elbows,  
have only *your records, your picture, your memory* to ask

could you still love me with each tooth in my mouth?

If you have the answer, please, Papa, tell me now. (lines 33-47)

I've taken Patsy's "She" and turned her from the new lover of the original song into the little girl I used to be. My Papa died when I was only seven, well before puberty or any sense of sexuality

had set in. It is impossible to know if he would have accepted or even tolerated the identities I hold onto now. By asking Papa, the subject, to answer me at the end of the poem, I am looking for reconciliation between the three of us: my grandfather, the little girl I was, and my current, trans-self.

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I find a lineage for both “putrescine // cadaverine” and “Papa’s Duet :: ‘She’s Got You’” in the poem “Aubade with Burning City” by Ocean Vuong, a fellow queer writer. In his poem, Vuong stitches together scenes and images from the fall of Saigon during the Vietnam War with lyrics from Irving Berlin’s “White Christmas.” This song was used “as a code to begin Operation Frequent Wind, the ultimate evacuation of American civilians and Vietnamese refugees” (Vuong, epigraph). When revising “Papa’s Duet,” I looked to this poem for a possible way to format the song lyrics that come in during the third section. I borrowed from Vuong his italics, how he works the lyric into lines but also lets some stand alone, how Vuong uses whitespace and line drops to sing each image down the page.

I’ve also learned a more intangible lesson from poets like Ocean Vuong. We are both writing about conflicts that we were not alive to witness but that greatly shaped our lives—neither one of us can shy away from the atrocities. But it is not enough to stop at recounting or lamenting the atrocities. More must be said, must be felt. Vuong accomplishes this in moments like this one:

*The treetops glisten and children listen, the chief of police  
facedown in a pool of Coca-Cola.*

*A palm-sized photo of his father soaking  
beside his left ear.*

The song moving through the city like a widow.

*A white... A white... I'm dreaming of a curtain of snow*

falling from her shoulders. (lines 26-32)

Vuong juxtaposes the image of a real person lying dead with the image of the song as a widow—I imagine her as being beautiful and tragic with all that snow on her shoulders.

For my own part, I find the final footnote from “putrescine // cadaverine :: what wasn’t said” to be a step past simple accounting or lament. Footnote four responds to the final lines in my original “putrescine” poem: “I hold my breath, as if I could keep the smell from my tongue. / You, who’s smelled the same for twenty years<sup>4</sup>...” (lines 26-27). It is in this moment that I create a tangible connection between father and child. Finally, we are meeting somewhere:

<sup>4</sup>Each day, I smell more like you, indistinguishable  
when I let my arms freckle in the sun, the scent of leather and salt  
blooming each time I reach for a glass of pink lemonade.  
If I could pump that sweetness through the phone,  
would you believe me then? . . .

(“putrescine // cadaverine :: what wasn’t said,” lines 14-18)

It is our smell that draws a familial connection between us. More than words, it is this sweet scent that I am hopeful could finally lead us closer to father and something more adjacent to son.

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I imagine myself as my father’s son in “sestina for an absentee father upon the rebirth of his child” and the pair of Otis<sup>3</sup> poems, “Dear Otis” and “Otis Replies :: Ghazal.” Through these poems, I question the space, both physically and metaphorically, my father would have occupied

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<sup>3</sup> Otis is the name my father wanted to give me if I was assigned male at birth. My mother’s response was, to paraphrase, fuck no.

if I had been born a boy: “. . . I’m sorry I wasn’t a son. / Would that have kept you around longer?” (“sestina,” lines 5-6) and “our Daddy would have stayed in that tiny Kansas town / long enough to raise you into a man built from his image” (“Dear Otis,” 4-5). These imagined scenarios always seem to spoil quickly—it is difficult to maintain the fantasy of a cisgender, heterosexual boy, and it is difficult to imagine a son that my father would have been prouder of.

I admit as much in “Otis Replies :: Ghazal”:

& nowhere for us to exist in between. Everyone knows what I am,  
fatherless faggot standing under five foot five, green-eyeing boys & girls

from behind the covers of books that promised a body shaped differently.

My chest is as much an empty weight as yours, neither boy nor girl— (lines 5-6)

I, as Otis, don’t even entertain the idea that our father would have stayed if we were born a boy. Otis knows that there is only one possibility for us, despite what genitals the doctors may have seen at our birth—we will always be outside of the binary, and that will always set us at odds with the people around us.

Because I cannot know how my father would have reacted to having a queer son or queer male child, I’ve looked to the father in B. H. Fairchild’s poem “Revenge” as a sort of inspiration. Fairchild’s father accuses the speaker of having a weak personality because the speaker reads and recites poetry—a veiled accusation that relates literary pursuits with weakness and queerness, as evident by the speaker’s reply:

*I don’t give a flying fuck about impressing  
other men. I can tell you, though, that I care  
about impressing Patricia Lea Gillespie,  
if that’s the sort of thing you’re worried about.* (lines 12-15)

Fairchild ends the poem in further defiance of the father, circling back to the title of the poem: “And I remember the grim, tight mask of his face / . . . and I sang to Kansas poems / I so loved that they became a kind of revenge” (lines 60, 62-63). From what I know of my father, of other fathers from similar circumstances, life as his son would not have been as easy as the best daydreams I can muster.

Fairchild’s “Revenge” also acted as a model for shaping another of my poems, “Car Accident at the Flagler Beach Farmers Market.” That poem also centers around my father and our relationship, but the narrative that unfolds is based on true events. This version of my father is real, no need to imagine. During revision, I took a note from Fairchild’s long sentences spanning several lines all across one stanza—these lines acted as a sort of permission to embrace the sprawling thoughts of my child persona, while also serving as a reminder of the container my own lines could fill. In “Revenge,” Fairchild cuts into the narrative with lines from Dylan Thomas’s poem “In My Craft or Sullen Art.” In “Car Accident,” I cut into my own narrative with my child, and sometimes childish, thoughts: “I see a bit of the struck woman stuck in the grill of their car, / so I think *I wish it was the Woman Waiting at Home*” (lines 76-77). Any revenge I may have dreamed for in this particular poem is directed not at the father, but at the stepmother waiting at home.

### **“Are You Even Human?”**

I never grew out of the child-like impulse to escape by shapeshifting—in this collection, I embrace that escapism by transforming into any number of animals, objects, and even places. After all, if I could not fit into the binary of woman and man, could I make an attempt at the binary between human and non-human? I displace myself in body and time with poems like “He

bends! He stretches! He even ties in knots!” and “The Fly.” I create almost reverse-anachronisms by casting myself in the role of toys, like Stretch Armstrong, and movies, like Cronenberg’s *The Fly* (1986), from before my birth. It can be inferred that someone older introduced me to these icons of the 70s and 80s; sticking with stereotypes, it could also be inferred that a boy or man introduced me to both the toy and the movie. By not referencing these introductions in each poem, I am laying claim to the kinship I feel for Stretch and Brundle, gender be damned. Or, more accurately, gender and body be questioned.

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Over the course of recent revisions, it has occurred to me that there is a current of religious trauma throughout this collection. I speak of it here because the Biblical and divine have often loomed in my mind as non-human beings borrowing human faces. Even characters like Jesus and the Virgin Mary seem more like models than people, but I suppose that is the point. Still, as I have moved farther from womanhood and farther from my birth name, I’ve become more obsessed with historical figures named Mary, especially the Madonna. In “Sonnets Overhead at the High :: Triptych,” I piece together parts of three different sonnets, letting them interrupt and speak over each other to mimic the overstimulation one might experience trying to follow the threads of conversation around them. These three sonnets are built around three different speakers: the Madonna, tired of her purity; the person I was when I first visited the High, still named Mary and struggling with my burgeoning attraction to women and non-men; and the person I am now, Merick, still figuring out my gender and body.

I open with my most immediate voice, the one most authentic to myself at the writing of the poem. Immediately, I, as Merick, identify with the insects hidden in Brueghel’s painting *Holy Family with a Garland of Flowers*: “Walking the halls of the High, I am more like the aphids &

wasps, / the caterpillars & moths Brueghel has hidden amongst his flowers” (lines 1-2). I then move us immediately to the Madonna, specifically the one featured in *Holy Family*: “Four hundred years as Mother is more than enough— / I’ve served my time, earned my own benedictions” (lines 3-4). From there, I move us to the young woman I thought I was when I first encountered this painting at the High: “*Madonna, I am here listening, more attentive than God, / than any man could ever be. If not for the guard standing watch, / I would kneel and learn to pray with hands folded in your thighs*” (lines 5-7). In order to make the movement between speakers more clear, I have formatted each differently. Merick is in the standard font of the collection (Times New Roman), Mary is an italicized version of the same, and the Madonna is in a different font, Garamond, to further signify her difference.

Sonnets seem the perfect vessel to turn an idea around in one’s mind, to question things like religion, sexuality, and gender, but there is a limit to what can be fit into only fourteen lines. I originally wrote the Madonna’s sonnet as a stand alone piece, but I received feedback in workshop and from my advisor that I needed to take more room to explore the conversations I was toying around. To help with revision, Dr. Kerry James Evans introduced me to several poems from Mark Jarman’s *Unholy Sonnets*, a full collection of sonnets that dance between the devotional and the blasphemous in their questioning. Jarman is turning over ideas about life and God in each sonnet, yes, but I could also see how those threads of questioning carried across the poems.

Perhaps my sonnets could also be considered blasphemous. After all, Mary finds a sexual awakening in the Madonna, imagining their escape together into other paintings and other positions: “. . . spread our syrupy fingers in juice-soaked / supplication. Would you let me drink deeply the dew that spills / from your petals? . . . ” (“Sonnets Overheard,” lines 24-26). The

Madonna herself prays for death (lines 36-37). And most offensive of all, Merick wishes to be someone or something other than they are:

I am more like the Untitled Calder twisting from the ceiling.  
Each time the lighting changes, I and my shadow are reborn.  
Isn't that what we always wanted? To shapeshift, to transmute  
from one state of matter to another, defying physics & art  
if only to find some life after the one we have been given. (lines 38-42)

No longer human or insect or even painting, I imagine myself instead as a sculpture, a mobile built around movement suspended from the ceiling. My desires are plain—to shapeshift, to transmute, to change from this body I was born into. Perhaps, even, to leave behind all the associations that have come with it and leave myself open to questioning as a joyful act.

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I end the collection on my most triumphant reimagining, rebodying. I open “Living Will :: Roadkill” by killing off my past-selves: “On the day I decide to bury every child I’ve been, / each little girl and demi-boy, / I see seven dead deer . . .” (lines 1-3). At this point, I and my past-selves are still human, and I have decided to cut ties with those versions of myself. It is only after I see all these dead deer in gruesome detail that I make the leap from human to animal:

Right inside the Perimeter, I see the last carcass—  
barely a buck,  
tender velvet antlers budding from the top of a head  
bent inward  
like a sick child sleeping—here I am, wrapped around  
grief, tossing myself  
before the tires of every passing semi-truck.

If I leave them—those girls I’ve been, those children—  
wandering the highway at night,

I can grant them the open air burials we've dreamed of. (lines 20-29)

I see myself in that last deer, the young buck, and here I am able to make the move into the freedom of hypotheticals. No longer must I simply bury my past-selves, I can instead embrace open air burials—I can mourn them in the open.

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Over the course of this collection, I and my speakers have inhabited a myriad of bodies: an asthmatic body, a damaged body, a child body and its many iterations, a threatened body, the body of a lobster, the body of an admired child's toy (but not the bodies of other beloved toys), the bodies of several literary seafaring captains, the body of a boy I could never be, the body of a girl I can no longer be, queer bodies, trans bodies, my sister's body and the bodies that grew inside, my father's body, bodies my father has killed or almost killed, the Atlantic Ocean, the Gulf of Mexico, a whale shark, an unnamed fish mid-filet, a Madonna, several paintings, a stone quarry, a reservoir, a fly, no fewer than seven dead deer—Living bodies, lost and found bodies, bodies as flesh and as ghost, as time and as place. Bodies as formal poems, sestinas and sonnets and ghazals, and as poems demanding their own shape. Each poem, each line, an attempt to build a body of work that in some way catalogs the many transformations, forced or chosen, that I have experienced in my life. It is my hope that anyone, myself and my parents included, could pick up this collection and find the singular thread of me throughout the many bodies I have been. I have been each of them, and they have all been me.

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